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Epicurean China: A Book Report

December 6, 2008 in [In Case You Missed It](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [3 comments](#)

By Kate Merkel-Hess

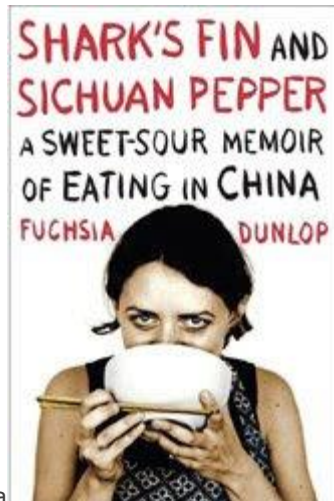
Browsing the new book shelf of the local public library this week, I noticed not one but a whole selection of books that delve into the regional cuisines of China. Just last summer, Nina and Tim Zagat wrote an op-ed for *The New York Times* titled, "[Eating Beyond Sichuan](#)," in which they called for greater diversity in the Chinese cuisine dished up around the U.S.—something more akin to the taste bud thrills anyone visiting or living in China experiences on a daily basis. There are intimations of Chinese cuisine diversity to come—such as the much-hailed developments in areas populated by large numbers of Chinese immigrants like [Flushing](#) in recent years. Whether or not these developments will eventually influence those MSG-laden, heavily sauced "Great Wall"s and "Chinatown"s scattered throughout the U.S. is yet to be seen. In the meantime, perhaps Chinese cuisine books will spread the word.

The first in my stack of library finds was [*The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese Food*](#), by Times writer [Jennifer 8. Lee](#). Beginning her book with an anecdote about a statistically improbable number of lottery winners who had chosen their numbers from a fortune coo



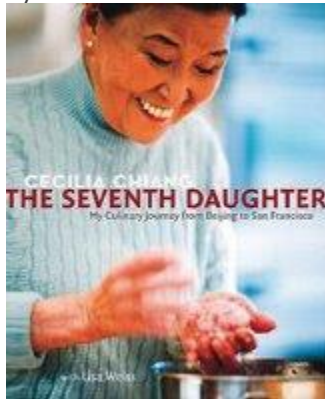
kie (a treat unknown in China), Lee explores both her own relationship to Chinese food (as the child of Taiwanese immigrants) and that of people around the world, including some of those Powerball winners. Through the series of interconnected essays that make up the book, Lee investigates the origins of General Tso and his chicken, the stories of Chinese immigrants running far-flung U.S. restaurants, and the origins of Chinese take-out, among other topics. Pegged on a charming anecdote, Lee's book also relays heartbreaking tales about some of the Chinese immigrants who staff restaurants across the country—emphasizing the social and economic ties that connect Fujian to New York City to little towns in Georgia or South Dakota.

In the past few years, memorably-named British chef [Fuchsia Dunlop](#) published several Chinese cookbooks ([Land of Plenty: A Treasury of Authentic Sichuan Cooking](#) and [Revolutionary Chinese Cookbook: Recipes from Hunan Province](#)). Having picked up her skills in a Sichuan cooking school,



Dunlop pushed the notion that Westerners needed to be more familiar with China's diverse cuisines (as in [this NPR interview](#)). This summer, she published *Shark's Fin and Sichuan Pepper: A sweet-sour memoir of eating in China*. Dunlop's story of her own love affair with Chinese cookery is also a story of being an outsider in China (the sweet-sour of the title), and her descriptions of that experience will ring true for anyone who has lived in China for any extended period (as she writes about her decision never to use MSG in her food: "My classmates regarded this as eccentric, but then they regarded everything I did as eccentric. Not using MSG was just the kind of thing you'd expect from a green-eyed alien like me"). Recipes accompany each chapter, but useful knowledge about Chinese cuisine is also scattered throughout Dunlop's narrative.

The last book I picked up at the library, *The Seventh Daughter: My Culinary Journey from Beijing to San Francisco* by Cecilia Chiang, looks more like a "food book" than the previous two. With a foreword by Alice Waters and illustrated with the sorts of luscious pictures some refer to as "food porn,"



in," this is the most practical of the three books if one is actually interested in cooking Chinese food (and not just thinking about and salivating over it). As she explains in the book, Chiang arrived in San Francisco for a short trip in 1960 (her husband was an ROC diplomat in Tokyo) and ended up staying to open a northern Chinese restaurant called The Mandarin (which finally closed its Ghirardelli Square location several years ago). The recipes for old standbys (like *yuxiang qiezi* and *basi xiangjiao*) are mixed in with stories about Chiang's life in China and after. As with many coffee table cookbooks, the name-dropping is insistent (as in "Chuck Williams, one of my oldest and dearest friends and the founder of Williams-Sonoma, loves this dish..."), but if you are in the right mood, this book is pleasurable light reading. And while I haven't tried any of the recipes, there are a number of staple dishes listed, with short lists of ingredients and only a few steps apiece.

There are certain to be more books of this sort as American familiarity with China's varied cuisines grows. In the meantime, these have enough mentions of star anise, shaoxing wine, and chili peppers to spark serious bouts of food-in-China nostalgia.

Tags: [Chinese cuisine](#), [Chinese food](#), [Fuchsia Dunlop](#)

